

**POETICS OF TRANSGRESSION**  
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## **ABSTRACT**

“Poetics of Transgression” disentangles the controversies surrounding three contemporary art works in order to take up the role of discomfort and the practice of transgression in contemporary art. The criticism thesis argues that although both employ tactics of antagonism, shock, and offense, we can delineate between transgression and mere offense according to the work’s efficacy in challenging the hegemonic order. Works are transgressive when they put into question the hegemonic order and works are offensive when they reinforce the hegemonic order. The tactics of disturbance may be the same but the definitive feature of transgression is that it oversteps and shocks to stimulate dialogue and to bring into clarity that which is under-articulated by the hegemonic order. Whereas offense obfuscates dialogue in order to uphold the hegemonic status quo, transgression instigates inquiry and makes demands of its viewer to engage with the ethical considerations of a work through provocation.

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For my great grandmother Анна,  
my grandmother, Ольга,  
and my mother, Наталья.

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## INTRODUCTION

Is it possible to defend offensive works in a way that vindicates their ambiguous moral status? Or are offensive practices worryingly marked by an ambivalence towards the moral issues that they provoke? “Poetics of Transgression” disentangles the controversies surrounding three contemporary art works in order to take up the role of offense in contemporary art and the practice of transgression. Through a series of case studies, this paper proposes that dissent and objection to offensive work and the debate they provoke is often preferable to censorship. Although to engage with difficult work is challenging, this thesis argues that these challenges to our ethical norms and political assumptions are essential to radically free democracy.

My thesis responds to the calls for censorship of three offensive works: Dana Schutz’s “Open Casket,” Artur Żmijewski’s “Berek,” and Renzo Martens’ “Episode III,” and I consider the ground on which these claims for censorship stand in order to consider alternative ways of engaging these offensive works. Although I outline and establish the offenses of each work, I evaluate each work for the potential of transgression as opposed to mere offense, and I argue that those transgressive aspects may redeem the respective works initial offenses.

The current response to offensive, transgressive work seems to be a polarizing divide between either censorship or unconditional moral relativism in defense of the works. I’m taking up this project because I find the current climate of responses to artworks that offend polarizing and inadequate, as both polarized approaches sidestep the offensive work’s ethical claims and demands on viewers. I propose that transgression offends precisely to elicit an emotional response from its viewers in order

to provoke ethical engagement. In avoidance of works that transgress and challenge a viewers assumptions and boundaries, viewers hegemonic positions are left unchallenged, or worse, selectively reinforced.

In “Regarding The Pain of Others” Susan Sontag reminds her readers that although we have an obligation to look at imagery that records great cruelties and crimes, we have an even greater obligation to think about what it means to look at them, and about our capacity to actually assimilate what they show. Sontag urges us to translate our compassion into action, otherwise our compassion withers. This criticism thesis culminates to a conclusion similar to that of Sontag, that sympathy alone can be an impertinent response to difficult work, some works require our discomfort.<sup>1</sup>

I defend transgressive practices because they challenge us to engage with the less than pleasant aspects of reality, and this confrontation allows us to reflect on our own assumptions as viewers at an imaginative distance. This argument in defense of transgression relies on the premise that the institution of art is well suited to be a site of “agonistic conflict”<sup>2</sup> because of its ability to offer viewers an imaginative distance from which to consider difficult topics. If deprived of the opportunity to explore difficult topics imaginatively and to be challenged by them, we risk atrophying our ability to renegotiate our ethics and political views. The institution of art as a site of agonistic conflict allows artworks to challenge our assumptions and unsettle viewers enough to

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003) 80.

<sup>2</sup> For Mouffe, the possibility of antagonism is a constant feature of human social life, which is characterized by conflicts with no rational, final resolution. Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking The World Politically*, Verso Books: 2013, 7-13.



engage us, but does so at an imaginative distance far enough from reality so as make the experience of being challenged bearable.

In order to clearly discuss the merit of transgressive art practices, it is important first to understand what is meant by the term aesthetic transgression historically. In *Transgressions, The Offenses of Art* Anthony Julius distinguishes the aesthetic of transgression as an art committed to violating social taboos. Art historical transgression can be defined as an overstepping of boundaries, boundaries as laid out by the community in which the work will be received. More than an aesthetic genre, transgression describes a general oppositional practice. Julius identifies four essential functions that comprise the transgressive ranging from “the denying of doctrinal truths; rule-breaking, including the violation of principles, conventions, or taboos; the giving of serious offense; and the exceeding, erasing or disordering of conceptual boundaries.”<sup>3</sup>

For example, Andres Serrano’s controversial photograph *Piss Christ*, which depicts a figurine of a crucified Jesus Christ in a vat of the artist’s urine, is often cited in the literature on transgressive work as quintessentially transgressive. Admittedly, Serrano’s work continues to generate controversy and public debate since the work’s debut in 1987, particularly because Serrano received funding for the work from the National Endowment for the Arts. But, what is it about *Piss Christ* that makes it transgressive? If the signature of a transgressive work is that it oversteps boundaries, in the case of *Piss Christ*, the work places what many consider to be sacred (the image of the crucifix) in a context that is not only profane but also abject. Transgressive art is thus defined in relation to its audience: there must be ethical boundaries internalized by

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Julius, *Transgressions, The Offenses of Art*, The University of Chicago Press, 2003, 31.

the audience members that the work oversteps. Obviously, these boundaries differ depending on the viewer, and they are assumed to vary from viewer to viewer, but every viewer has ethical boundaries (even radical nihilism can be placed onto an ethical spectrum.)

There are works and practices that clearly violate more boundaries than others and some works seem to be more transgressive because of the types of boundaries they violate. For example, a work resulting in a death would be considered more transgressive than one which merely annoyed its viewer. I do not claim to define any precise metric by which the transgressiveness of a work should be characterized, but it is clearly something which admits to degrees. Further, the transgressed boundaries need not be related to beliefs in the sacred, they may also take the expression of being at odds with expectations of what an artwork will consist of, or norms regarding social interaction or viewer etiquette. Art historical transgression also carries with it a unique aesthetic, the aesthetic of discomfort. Each of the works discussed in this thesis is framed as transgressive because each makes unusual demands of the audience, in a way that could be considered aggressive or coercive. In addition, transgressive practices demand engagement with the work on an ethical, as opposed to a merely representational level.

Anthony Julius attributes contemporary art's turn to transgress, insult, and offend to the influence of Georges Bataille, whose thinking maintained that in a society dominated by concerns about productivity and order, true internal freedom can only be achieved by violating taboos, as a means of breaking down the barriers imposed by civility and reason. Bataille proposed that "fear and horror are not the real and final

reaction; on the contrary, they are a temptation to overstep the bounds.”<sup>4</sup> Degradation, the violation of taboos, and violence, are all for Bataille mechanisms of transgression which facilitate a traversal into the realm of the real, as that which is beyond and prior to the imposition of law, language and rational order. To define transgression, Bataille conceptualizes a movement towards a threshold, where the self is being pushed to its own limits, where it uncovers new limits, in an infinite procedure; even as transgression liberates the self from its confines, new limits are imposed that must be transgressed anew.

Walking in tandem with transgression of the taboo, is the enforcement of limits as they currently stand through censorship. For clarity and consistency, censorship as it is referred to in this project will be defined as the suppression of words, images, or ideas that are perceived as disturbing by some part of the population and it happens whenever someone succeeds in imposing their personal political or moral values on another by restraining access to the content they take issue with. By contrast, when individuals organize in opposition to the content of which they disapprove, their actions are protected under their right to freedom of speech.

What does it mean to request the censorship of an offending work, what power do we invest in a work that would require that action? In “Can Disputes Over Censorship Be Resolved?” Donald Crawford gives the logic of the censorship debate its most thorough treatment. Crawford frames the censorship debate traditionally, as a problem arising from the conflict of three different interests: (a) an interest in the integrity of the artistic process; (b) an interest in freedom of choice and expression; and

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<sup>4</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism, Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986, 144.

(c) an interest in social control over what is socially undesirable or harmful. For Crawford, the cornerstone of censorship disputes appears to be the assumed connection between exposure to violent content and subsequent socially undesirable consequences.<sup>5</sup> Moral corruption, debasement, depravity, and degeneration are the feared effects of exposure to representations of violence. Crawford speculates that behind this assumption “must lurk still another fear which reflects a conviction about man's inherent nature, a pessimism about the stability of his character and his openness to corruptive influences which is judged to require the legislation of private morality.”<sup>6</sup> What is corruptible is our character and this, independent of any subsequent actions we may take, is what seems to be at the impasse of every censorship debate.

Calls for censorship are therefore not motivated by aesthetic taste, but by the belief that exposure to depictions of the unethical causes people to form unethical, anti-social views. Pro-censorship forces often allege that viewing depictions of violence leads to behavioral violence, but correlational studies that seek to explain why some aggressive people have a history of watching a lot of violent TV suffer from the chicken-and-egg dilemma: does representation of violence cause people to behave aggressively, or do aggressive people prefer more violent entertainment? There is no definitive answer. Whatever influence representations of violence have on behavior, studies have concluded its effects are marginal compared to other factors. According to the Center for Communication Policy at UCLA, even children know the difference between representation and reality, and their attitudes and behavior are shaped more

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<sup>5</sup> Donald Crawford, “Can Disputes Over Censorship Be Resolved?” *Ethics*, Vol. 78, No. 2 The University of Chicago Press, 1968, 93-108.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 96.

by life circumstances and reality than by the books they read or the programs they view.<sup>7</sup>

Our right to freedom of expression is based upon upholding the value that in a democratic society, individual adults must be free to decide for themselves what to read, write, paint, draw, view and hear. If we are disturbed by images of violence, we as individuals can decline to engage with such content. More importantly, we can also exercise our own freedom of expression rights by voicing our objections and condemnation to forms of expression we take offense at. Justice Louis Brandeis' advice that the remedy for messages we disagree with or dislike in art, entertainment or politics is "more speech, not enforced silence,"<sup>8</sup> is as fitting today as it was when given in 1927. It is the degree of public support for free speech, for all, that makes the difference between repression and debate.

The tension between transgression and censorship opens up much broader questions about the role of art as an expression of truth, and the problematic implications of forcibly constraining that expression. That art is still capable of provoking debate and protest is a testament to its value and power, and an admission of its complexity and its links to the political. The controversy which censorship attracts also raises the question of the art institutions' role in the ethics of representation, and the idea that such institutions might have social responsibility.

This paper outlines what comprises aesthetic transgression and how the aforementioned contemporary art works are unambiguously offensive, in order to

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<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Cole, *The UCLA television violence monitoring report*, Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Communication Policy, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> ACLU, *Freedom of Expression in the Arts and Entertainment*, 2017.

ultimately highlight the merit of the strategies of transgression. Dissent and objection to offensive works and the debate they provoke is a more generative route to engagement with the difficult topics that the transgressive works take up than censure and avoidance. More broadly, “Poetics of Transgression” is an argument being made in favor of “agonistic conflict” and debate about the offensive over its repression.

Transgression defines itself in opposition to mass culture and, following Bataille’s conception of transgression, it should be intertwined with a sense of liberation. More recently, however, what appears to be transgression’s energy, its tactics of shock, the irrational, degradation, unrestrained by any moral self-censure, has passed to the conservative far right, to the very church and state that transgression is meant to challenge. In this transition we have a paradox: transgression, or rather its tactics, are being allied to repression.

The transgressive is characterized by a perceived assault on rationality. Under the guise of a war on “political correctness,” the conservative right revels in insult and abuse. It breaches the taboos outlined by progressive culture, by the left, against homophobia, racism, misogyny, transphobia, ableism, and xenophobia. The tactics of disturbance may be the same, but the definitive feature of transgression, as I advocate for it, and as supported by agonistic conflict is that it oversteps and shocks to stimulate dialogue and to bring into clarity that which is under-articulated by the hegemonic order, not to obfuscate and uphold it.

The contemporary right-wing culture of provocation has precisely the opposite aims: it uses shame and threat to close down space for expression and debate through what I more accurately frame as offense, not transgression. Mere offense as opposed

to transgression obfuscates and stifles dialogue in order to uphold the hegemonic order, whereas transgression instigates inquiry and makes demands of its viewer to engage with the ethical considerations of a work through provocation in order to question the current hegemonic order. Transgression plays an important role by subverting the dominant hegemony and by contributing to the construction of new perspectives.

Encounter with a transgressive work challenges viewers' ethical assumptions by confronting them with radical difference, forcing viewers to reassess and articulate our ethical positions and assumptions in response to the offense we feel. Transgression as a methodology, as opposed to mere offense, is redeemed by its challenging of hegemony, serving the function of radical democracy. My use of transgression as opposed to offense parallels Chantal Mouffe's notion of agonistic conflict, which I reframe as transgression when agonistic conflict is facilitated in the specific context of contemporary art. I propose that the way aesthetic transgression has been defined art historically as an oppositional practice mirrors Mouffe's concept of agonistic conflict in its counter-hegemonic function.

Although Mouffe takes up the institution of art as a setting for agonistic conflict, I employ her criteria for what constitutes agonistic conflict and her methodology in a more specified way in order to delineate the difference between transgression and mere offense, looking more closely at specific artworks and their ability to challenge hegemony rather than discussing the institution of art at large. Where Mouffe proposes that agonistic conflict and a willingness to have our assumptions and positions challenged is essential to the maintenance of a radically free democracy, I similarly

propose that a transformation of the self occurs when encountering something radically different from ourselves through transgressive artworks. Transgressive practices are the radical difference that challenges us in the context of contemporary art, and delineating the separation between offense, which does not contribute to challenging hegemony, and transgression, which does succeed in challenging hegemony, sets apart offensive works from transgressive works.

The first case study of this paper looks at the exhibition of Dana Schutz's "Open Casket" at the 2017 Whitney Biennial. The "Open Casket" chapter outlines the nature of the work's offense as commodity racism<sup>9</sup> and considers the calls for destruction of the work. Peter Lamarque's notion of aesthetic transvaluation is applied to the work as a proposed alternative to destruction of the work, and Roger Simon's thinking around curating difficult knowledge is applied as a proposed alternative to censorship of the work.

The second case study looks at the controversy surrounding Artur Żmijewski's "Berek," which has been accused of not respecting the dignity of the victims of the Holocaust due to the insensitivity it displays towards its subject matter, and the work was eventually censored from view on two separate occasions. "Berek" is contextualized within Żmijewski's larger artistic practice of antagonism and the merits of the artists' antagonistic approach are explored through Chantal Mouffe's thinking around agonistic politics and the essential role of conflict to democracy.

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<sup>9</sup> Commodity racism refers to the way in which racism finds its expression through commodities. The concept was first proposed by McClintock, who argued that, from the late nineteenth century, racism encoded into commodities and their advertising campaigns was a key tool in the British project of colonization. Elizabeth Chin, "Commodity Racism" *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies*, 1, 2015, 1.



The final case study looks at Renzo Martens' cinematic work "Episode III," which is controversial for denying its subjects respect or agency through the process of its making. Further, rather than simply represent injustice, Martens intentionally provokes and performs injustice precisely for consumption by Western audiences. The work is defended on the grounds that it offers a lesson on the power of discomfort to disrupt unethical image practices. It is successful in disrupting an unethical image practice precisely because Martens refuses the feel-good approach that sustains aid photo regimes<sup>10</sup>, by exposing, through provocation, the self-interest that underwrites sentimental approaches to representing poverty.

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<sup>10</sup> Sanne Sinnige, "Evidence, Subjectivity and Verité in Renzo Martens' Episode III: Enjoy Poverty – a Shot-By-Shot Analysis" *IMAGE [&] NARRATIVE* Vol. 18, No.2, 2017, 86.

## OPEN CASKET

“People want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry,  
which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance.”  
— Susan Sontag<sup>11</sup>

The first time I viewed *Open Casket*, unaware of the subject matter it addressed, I didn't feel very much. The painting is an abstraction of a figure in aerial view. The work felt overwhelmingly flat, and I remember thinking that the abstraction of the figure's face redacted the figure any intensity of personhood. My eye is drawn to the collar of the shirt, my attention lingers on its sterility. The flesh is blue, twisted, striped.

Dana Schutz's *Open Casket*, a controversial painting on display at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, depicted the mutilated body of Emmett Till, and the backlash against the work began even before the Whitney Biennial opened. “Who is the audience for this painting?” wrote artist Devin Kenny, wondering why this painting of black suffering by a white artist was going to be featured in the biennial. “What action is this work purportedly, and actually doing? Does it inform? Shock? Build connection? Help a new audience understand either emotionally or intellectually the complex set of factors all falling under the umbrella of white supremacy, sexism, and anti-blackness that led to this young person's death?”<sup>12</sup>

In the summer of 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old boy, left his home in Chicago to spend some time in Mississippi with his great-uncle Mose Wright. On August

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003) 23.

<sup>12</sup> Lisa Larson-Walker, “The Problem With the Whitney Biennial's Emmett Till Painting Isn't That the Artist Is White,” *SLATE*, March 2017, 4.

24th, Till and his friends visited Bryant's Grocery & Meat Market to buy some bubblegum where Till had some kind of an interaction with Carolyn Bryant, a white woman and the market owner's wife. Early in the morning of August 28th, Carolyn's husband, Roy Bryant, and his brother J. W. Milam, abducted Till from his uncle's home. They beat him unconscious, they shot him in the head, they fastened a large metal fan to his neck with barbed wire, and they sank his body in the Tallahatchie River. On August 31st, Till's naked body was found floating in the river, the metal fan still attached to his neck.<sup>13</sup>

When Till's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, came to identify her son, she told the funeral director, "Let the people see what I've seen."<sup>14</sup> She made the decision to leave the casket open at her son's funeral because she wanted the world to see the visceral brutality of lynching. For four days, tens of thousands of people came to view the remains of Emmett Till's body in a Chicago church. Jet magazine published David Jackson's photographs of Till's face post mortem and his murder became international news that highlighted the violent racism of the Jim Crow South.<sup>15</sup>

On March 17, 2017, the opening day of the Whitney Biennial, dozens of protesters took turns standing in front of Schutz's work to block it from view. The protest was organized by the artist Parker Bright, who wore a shirt that said "black death spectacle" as he stood in front of the piece. Artist Hannah Black published an open

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<sup>13</sup> *Prosecutive Report of Investigation Concerning Emmett Louis Till*, 1-50 (Federal Bureau of Investigation February 9, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> "When One Mother Defied America: The Photo That Changed the Civil Rights Movement," *TIME*, July 10, 2016, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Jacqueline Goldsby, "The High and Low Tech of It: The Meaning of Lynching and the Death of Emmett Till," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 9, no. 2 (1996): 82.

letter addressed to the curators of the Whitney Biennial, in which she called for the destruction of the work, writing that “non-Black artists who sincerely wish to highlight the shameful nature of white violence cannot treat Black pain as raw material.” In the letter, Black expresses concerns around the work’s integration into the art market and the work’s subsequent valorization by it, writing that “even the disfigured corpse of a child was not sufficient to move the white gaze from its habitual cold calculation is evident daily and in a myriad of ways, not least the fact that this painting exists at all. In brief: the painting should not be acceptable to anyone who cares or pretends to care about Black people because it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalized for a long time.”<sup>16</sup> The request for the destruction of the painting is aimed at its existence as a commodity, but also as a site of pleasure. For Black the destruction of the work is the only way to ensure its inability to find a way into any market or museum, to be exchanged or accumulated.

Schutz defended her work, saying it was “not a rendering of the photograph but is more an engagement with the loss, that “I don’t know what it is like to be black in America but I do know what it is like to be a mother.”<sup>17</sup> The ambiguity of this justification was found inadequate by many audiences, considering the historical significance of Emmett Till's post-mortem photograph. Emmett Till's name has circulated widely since his death. It has come to stand not only for Till himself but for the mournability of people

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<sup>16</sup> Alex Greenberger, “The Painting Must Go’: Hannah Black Pens Open Letter to the Whitney About Controversial Biennial Work,” *artNews*, March 21, 2017, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Rachel Herron. Activists Call for the Immediate Removal of White Artist's Emmett Till Painting for 'Transmuting Black Suffering Into Fun. *BET*, 2017, 2.

marked as disposable, for the weight so often given to a white woman's word above a Black child's comfort or survival. It is arguably, this power imbalance continuing to proliferate through the exhibition of a black child's death for the benefit of Dana Schutz's career.

In response to audiences calling for the removal of *Open Casket* from the Whitney Biannual, the curators Mia Locks and Christopher Lew wrote that, "by exhibiting the painting we wanted to acknowledge the importance of this extremely consequential and solemn image in American and African American history and the history of race relations in this country. The painting has tremendous emotional resonance, particularly for black viewers."<sup>18</sup> But is "tremendous resonance" enough? Resonance at what cost? And who's paying it? There is a sort of cynicism to the justification of starting a conversation, because just how much of another's sorrow and grief is a conversation worth? Is this risk calculable? Is it possible to defend a work like *Open Casket* in a way that vindicates its ambiguous ethical message?

Schutz is a painter with a history of approaching gory imagery with colorful ambiguity. Her figures are cartoonish and often invoke humor, and it's exactly this detachment from Emmett Till's very real, horrific death that viewers found so objectionable. In *Lynching and Spectacle* Amy Louise Wood argues that lynching photographs constructed and perpetuated white supremacist ideology by creating images of helpless and powerless black men. Does *Open Casket* not function similarly? There is a parallel between the disproportionate power dynamics of a renowned white artist creating images of a black child's pain. The gesture seems to opportunistically

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<sup>18</sup> Lovia Gyarye and Josephine Livingstone, "The Case Against Dana Schutz," *New Republic*, 2017.

utilize a brutalized black body in order to gain art critic approval. If those the painter wishes to depict are those whose historical and present-day experiences she is exempt from, can she accurately represent them?

Scholar Christina Sharpe contends in an interview, that the debate surrounding *Open Casket* is less about cultural appropriation and free speech, but rather about intimacy and our different relationships to violence. Sharpe calls our attention to the ways in which Schutz's painting works, when compared to the way that the photograph, published only in *Jet* magazine, functioned at the time: "Mamie Till Mobley makes the decision, against much advice, to have those photographs of her son published. It was not mainstream media - or white media - that published those images ...They were for black people, because *Jet* was a black publication. They weren't meant to create empathy or shame or awareness from white viewers. They were meant to speak to and to move a Black audience."<sup>19</sup>

Lisa Whittington's *How She Sent Him and How She Got Him Back* (2012) memorialized Emmett Till four years prior to *Open Casket*. Whittington's before-and-after painting renders the total rupture in appearance that Till suffered, the doubled image his mother would have to confront upon his return. *How She Sent Him and How She Got Him Back* is about disfiguration and torment, the wide-eyed living half of Till's face is juxtaposed with the half that is now torn beyond recognition. Careful, slow burning witness is the leitmotif of Whittington's painting. In an interview about her work in relation to *Open Casket*, Whittington remarked: "The horror was too gentle in her work. She downplayed the details and the emotion his death represented. Looking at

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<sup>19</sup> Sharpe, Christina and Mitter Siddhartha. "What Does It Mean to Be Black and Look at This? A Scholar Reflects on the Dana Schutz Controversy." *Hyperallergic*, March 2017, 1.

her work, it feels like Emmett's death was easy. Dana dressed him in a tux, put a flower on him, and she allows the viewer to close the casket and move on. Where is the artwork that interprets the lies that got Emmett Till killed? Where are the portraits of the men who lynched Emmett? What was in their eyes during the act of murder? What color is remorse? Does she have nothing to say there?"<sup>20</sup>

*Open Casket* is framed by Schutz as a gesture of interracial maternal empathy with Mamie Till-Mobley, but that does not extricate the artist from considerations of intersectionality. Unlike Schutz, Whittington creates a portrait more conducive to a meditation on loss. This kind of directed thought is not evident in Schutz's rendering of *Open Casket*. The swirling multicolor of Till's disfigured face feels unconnected to the immense historical weight and significance of this particular photograph. In choosing to alter the violent, physical distortions to Till's face, Schutz diffused the historical and political importance of Emmett Till's open casket. That choice by Till's mother to unveil the brutality of white supremacist violence in America is made weak by the omissions inherent to abstraction. The exhibition of *Open Casket* makes a spectacle of Till's death once more, only this time, in a context devoid of the respectful frameworks required for mourning.

The controversy surrounding the 2017 Whitney Biennial raises questions around commodity racism, the white gaze, and the limits of empathy. Taking the debate sparked by Schutz's *Open Casket* as a starting point, viewers should engage with the topic of white supremacy in the art institution, holding the exhibition as an agent accountable for its activity. There is a legitimate frustration among viewers that a theme so central to

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<sup>20</sup> Lisa Whittington, "#MuseumsSoWhite: Black Pain and Why Painting Emmett Till Matters," *NBCBLK*, March 2017, 3.

black history should be explored, in a major institution, by a white artist. For Dana Schutz to represent Emmett Till in his casket communicates an ignorance of the role a white women's narrative played in that murder and the way it cancelled out Till's own voice/expression. Further, for curatorial authorship to ignore the artist's positionality in relation to the subject matter she was working with conveys ignorance at best, and race-baiting opportunism at worst.

In the case of *Open Casket* and the calls for censorship of the work, the exhibition of the work and the role of curatorial authorship, seems to be its critically overlooked failure. *Open Casket* as it was presented at the 2017 Whitney Biennale failed to bear witness to the tragedy it indexed. The work's abstraction detracted from the possibility of witness, leaving only empty spectacle in place of emotional closeness and witnessing. And if the work does not bear adequate witness to the tragedy of Emmett Till's brutalization, instead aestheticizing it, then the making public of such a work does seem to amount to defamation and the erasure/disparaging of Black History. If the exhibition as a medium is an inherently implicated one, the question then becomes, can the making public of *Open Casket* by the Whitney Museum, be considered an unethical? Should the work be censored as requested? Does exposure to unethical image practices, ones that refuse respect or agency to their subjects, harm its viewers?

In "Tragedy and Moral Value" Peter Lamarque argues that violent works, by focusing on motifs with negative values such as moral failure and nihilistic cruelty, have the potential to elaborate on ethical themes through sublimation in the tragic. Part of the value of offensive art is in its aesthetic ability to express what Lamarque calls a



“metaphysical picture,”<sup>21</sup> which he argues possesses its own independent moral significance. To demonstrate how the aesthetic transvaluation of morality is affected through shock, revulsion, and outrage, Lamarque proposes a distinction between the internal and external aspects of an artwork. The internal is the immediate affective reaction to the work as it is being experienced. This involuntary response is seen, in relation to transgressive art, as moral outrage, disgust, shame, guilt, pity, etc. In terms of the initial experience, internal aspects of the work would be experienced by complete absorption in, and simultaneously in visceral repulsion from, the transgressive work in question. Yet this immediate visceral internal aspect is complemented by the external aspect of the work, which is a consequential, post-response to the work that follows, and is dependent on the earlier initial reaction.

Lamarque suggests that we can come to appreciate, in hindsight, the same work that provoked an initial visceral reaction of contempt. The work appears as expressive of a meta-ethical narrative that transcends, and Lamarque suggests ultimately justifies, the specific immoralities responsible for the immediate reaction of repulsion and shock. The major aspect of the work is revealed in hindsight, by gradual release, transcending the immediate immorality associated. It comes to light through Lamarque’s “external aspect”<sup>22</sup> that cancels and transcends the immediate immorality associated with the work. This results in a re-evaluation of the merit of the work as a whole, and for Lamarque the principle characteristic of the external aspect is precisely the questioning of the emotional response associated with the initial immediate reaction.

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<sup>21</sup> Lamarque, Peter “Tragedy and moral value” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 1995, 275.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

For Lamarque, what matters more than the immediate transgressions of a work is the experience of considering our own ethical position in relation to the subject matter that repulses us. Offense, revulsion and shock elicit a sympathetic response and moral themes are paradoxically rendered more abrupt, urgent and intensely felt through our evaluation of our reactions. In the specific case of *Open Casket*, without experiencing an offense to the historical insensitivity it displays, how would we know we value historical sensitivity? Even if *Open Casket* is an ethical failure and a violent work, is silent repression through censorship, or destruction of the work, the most conducive response? Without the emotional experience of recoiling from Schutz's mistreatment of Emmett Till's memory, how would we as viewers know what we stand for? Lamarque ultimately makes the argument that the process of offense is fundamental to the ethical experience, that anger sensitizes us to the emotional life of others. Moral conduct requires that we see the world as others see it, and this requires that we strive for emotional connectedness, anger and indignation included. However, the burden does fall on contemporary art institutions who choose to display transgressive work to put into place the conditions that make it possible to experience rage, offense, and tragedy in an environment conducive to directed thought and dialogue. If not in our institutions of pedagogy, then where?

All of the aforementioned thinking ultimately brings us to the question of, what does it mean to exhibit a violent artwork successfully, so that viewers might bear witness to the actualities of suffering? In *A Pedagogy of Witnessing* Roger Simon discusses artworks in direct complicity with the violence they index. Simon focuses on how those responsible for presenting such exhibitions have reframed the work so that they

functioned to contest the very unethical purpose for which they were made. Simon suggests that successful exhibition of a difficult work must always be understood as essentially connected to the event of its appearance, an event that always occurs in the world. The force of the work comes from its capacity to touch viewers who feel, rather than simply see, the events depicted. Further, the force of an artwork has less to do with the experience of seeing something in it that moves us, but rather the feeling that, in looking at a work, one experiences a sense of being seen. Successful exhibition of a difficult work will compel us to reflect on our own role in the conditions (of the event) of the work's creation. Affect works on us not just as a felt loss, but as an uninvited, felt responsibility that one cannot remain indifferent when faced with the pain of another.

Simon warns curators that every exhibition takes on the risk of reenacting symbolic violence and re-presenting pain. He describes this risk as the problem of undirected emotions, affect provoked without anywhere to go, a directionless disturbance, "characterized by a dark complex of sentimentality and superiority."<sup>23</sup> Meaningful engagement with violent works forces us to confront our own positionality and agency in the world, and if applicable, bearing witness to violence forces us to acknowledge the privileges of the identities we hold. For Simon, it is precisely this abandonment of thought that constitutes the risk assumed when exhibiting the painful.

In "Difficult exhibitions and intimate encounters" Roger Simon elaborates on this point further, considering what it is about exhibitions that render them 'difficult' and, more importantly, what can be achieved by making painful histories public. Particularly relevant to the *Open Casket* case study is Simon's proposition that museums function

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<sup>23</sup> Roger Simon. *A Pedagogy of Witnessing, Curatorial Practice and the Pursuit of Social Justice*. 2014, SUNY Press, 46.

as institutions of social memory with a potential public role in constituting what members of any given society understand as their cultural heritage. Simon encourages curators to create exhibitions that go beyond knowledge acquisition and admiration of what is institutionally presented as valuable heritage, but rather “needed are practices of social memory that conceive of cultural inheritance as a process requiring the commitment to critically engage a past that is both inspiring and despairing.”<sup>24</sup> Two central concepts inform Simon’s discussion: first, the notion that difficult exhibitions at times render a burdensome gift, a demand of the viewer that contains within it the expectation of an empathic response; and second, the notion of the intimate encounter: an exhibition experience which offers visitors the potential for insight that may support new ways of relating with and within the world around them.

Simon distinguishes the difficult exhibition from one that has merely been deemed controversial. Simon frames the controversial exhibition as one that provokes serious public disagreements about the adequacy and accuracy of an exhibit’s narrative and interpretative frame. In addition to issues of adequacy and accuracy, these disagreements have also focused on the exclusions enacted by an exhibition, the ethics of exhibiting particular objects, or even the legitimacy of holding an exhibition in the first place. Beyond its potential for controversy, what is meant by the difficult exhibit as Simon presents it, is difficulty understood as an aspect of visitor experience that implicates both cognitive and affective aspects of that experience. One way an exhibition might be said to be difficult is if visitors undergo significant challenges to their interpretive abilities. A difficult exhibition is experienced as “eliciting the burden of

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<sup>24</sup> Bonnell, Jennifer and Simon, Roger. “Difficult exhibitions and intimate encounters” *museum and society*, July 2007. 5(2) 2007, 65-85.

‘negative emotions’, those unpleasant feelings of grief, anger, shame, or horror that histories can produce, particularly if they raise the possibility of complicity of one’s country, culture, or family in systemic violence”<sup>25</sup> such as the seizure of aboriginal land, the slave trade, or the perpetration of genocide. Difficult exhibitions evoke a heightened anxiety that accompanies feelings of identification with the victims of violence as well as the perpetrators of that violence.

“Difficult exhibitions and intimate encounters” culminates in the conclusion that what might be experienced as difficult subject matter does not rest with particular objects nor the events to which they refer. Rather, the experience of difficulty “resides in the efforts to make meaning that are constituted in the relationship between a visitor and the material presented in an exhibit, a relationship that is always specifically contextualized,” which seems to me, to fall onto the curator/curatorial authorship rather than the artist. When discussing difficult exhibitions, the curatorial question that must be asked and addressed with consideration is: difficult for whom? While experience of difficulty will vary with factors such as time and place, gender and generation, political orientation or ethnic and/or national background, Simon urges curators to embrace the complex, conflict-ridden, and tragic spectrum of human history. Difficult exhibitions should strive to convey the message that a painful, unredeemed history must be confronted in ways that support a hopeful future while simultaneously teaching humility in the face of the unpredictability of life. Behind this argument is the assumption that if museums present exhibitions that tell troubling stories that have been systemically ignored and/or willfully forgotten, and do so in a way that is emotionally engaging and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

elicits empathy for others, this will enrich the consideration of civic life in our communities and nation. The challenge is to design exhibitions to support visitors in the recognition that a difficult exhibition implicates the self in the practice of coming to terms with the substance and significance of history.

*Open Casket* presents a unique challenge to the categorization of an art work as either offensive or transgressive. It is offensive because of its commodity racism, but the work is also ambiguous enough in its aesthetic presentation that it doesn't predetermine an ethical response from its viewers, because of this, the work was able to facilitate the kind of agonistic conflict that Mouffe advocates for as an unanticipated consequence to its exhibition in a major institution. It is undeniable that the controversy surrounding its exhibition facilitated a robust conversation around white supremacy and commodity racism in the art institution. Because of its critical reception by audiences, I found this work difficult to categorize as either offensive or transgressive.

*Open Casket* has the potential to be reframed as transgressive as opposed to merely offensive if the work were to be presented differently curatorially. As Simon proposes, there are ways to engage with objects that are complicit in the violence they index, if through curatorial strategies these works can be reframed to counter the violence they index, and to challenge the hegemonic order. However, if we are considering the work as it stood at the 2017 Whitney Biennale through the lens of agonistic conflict, *Open Casket* ends up reinforcing hegemonic racism.

## BEREK

“Just the provocation: can you look at this?”  
— Susan Sontag<sup>26</sup>

The opening shot of Artur Żmijewski's 1999 video installation *Berek* or *Game of Tag* films nude men and women, hesitantly filing into an empty concrete basement. The film takes place in two rooms. The first is a concrete basement, the second, is the gas chamber of a former Nazi concentration camp, Stutthof. 65,000 people were killed in the confines of this space using Zyklon-B and the yellow-blue stains left by the gas can still be seen on the walls. Some of the participants convey hesitation and uncertainty through their body language as they slowly enter the room, they make modest gestures to cover their nudity from the camera with their hands. Others convey confidence straightaway, they swing their arms from side to side, roll on the balls of their feet, and hop around in small strides in an effort to warm themselves up.

In the next shot, quite suddenly, the participants are seen playing, they chase after one another and laugh often. Nothing about their behavior conveys to the viewer that they are encumbered by the discomfort of the setting any longer. As they run in circles and touch one another, all are animated. The participants are filmed engaged in play for 4 minutes and 29 seconds. The work begins without preface and ends with no afterward, viewers are left ambivalent about the context in which the work was made, being informed only of the location of its making. Żmijewski, when describing *Game of Tag*, ascribes a 'therapeutic' character to the situation: that “certain events from the Nazi

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<sup>26</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003) 34.

era were repeated, with only the ending changed: Visually, there was a strong similarity between the two situations. But this time nothing bad happened. Instead of tragedy, we're watching innocent, childish play. This resembles a clinical situation in psychotherapy. You return to the traumas that brought about your complex. You recreate them, almost like in theatre.”<sup>27</sup> Żmijewski’s description of the work has a manipulating ethical ambiguity to it: he compares it to a psychotherapeutic clinical setting, as though he is hinting that he intends the work serve as a sort of abreactive therapy<sup>28</sup> for viewers traumatized by the Holocaust, but he is simultaneously not offering anything resembling responsibility or ownership over the work’s effect on viewers. Also, he does not identify any professional credentials that could legitimate the administration of this sort of psychotherapeutic experience to unsuspecting audiences.

Throughout his practice Żmijewski has repeatedly touched on Poland’s Holocaust history. For the video installation *80064* (2004) Żmijewski persuades Jozef Tarnawa, a ninety-two-year-old Auschwitz survivor, to have the fading tattoo of his prisoner number reapplied on his arm. The film begins by Żmijewski himself engaging Jozef in a conversation about Jozef’s memories and recollections of Auschwitz. The onset of the film serves to build a familiarity with Jozef and the details of his memories help viewers align themselves with viewing the film from Jozef’s perspective. From the

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<sup>27</sup> “If it happened only once it’s as if it never happened,” *Kunsthalle Basel 2005 exhibition catalogue*, 152.

<sup>28</sup> In psychoanalysis, abreaction refers to reliving an experience to purge it of its emotional excesses. The concept was first introduced by Sigmund Freud in 1893 to denote the fact that repressed emotions associated with a trauma can be brought into focus and discharged through talking about them. However, Żmijewski’s reference to “the clinical situation in psychotherapy” is not harmonious with Freud’s practice and application of abreactive therapy, which focused on considering the emotions associated with trauma rather than a “reliving” of the traumatic scenario itself. Salman Akhtar, ed. *Comprehensive dictionary of psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac Books, 2009. 1.



conversation, the viewer is able to gather that Jozef had agreed beforehand to have the tattoo reapplied, but on film he is seen having changed his mind, and is pleading not to have the tattoo reapplied. Żmijewski begins to persuade Jozef, there is a back and forth between the two that intensifies until Jozef eventually surrenders to Żmijewski's heckling. The tattooist begins to retrace Jozef's 80064 and here the most effecting, disturbing, and implicating part of the film ensues as the deafeningly loud sound of the tattoo gun dominates the film's soundtrack. The framing of the shot focuses on Jozef but is slightly out of focus so that the viewers' attention shifts to the auditory stimulation emitting from the work rather than the visual image. The sound of the tattoo gun rings overwhelmingly loud for 73 particularly difficult, implicating seconds. Immediately afterward, Jozef conveys no discernible reaction to the reapplication. The final resolution to the work is, again, just open-ended enough to be received by the viewer as a sense of confusion as to the artists' intention.

Żmijewski similarly describes *80064* as an experiment with memory, that he expected "under the effect of the tattooing the 'doors of memory' would open, that there would be an eruption of remembrance of that time, a stream of images or words describing the painful past."<sup>29</sup> If the viewer is generous, reapplying the number could be interpreted as a metaphor about memory and history, that we cannot forget catastrophes of cruelty and dehumanization, or similar events are bound to happen again. Other viewers, not as generous with the moral ambiguity of Żmijewski's practice, may not find this attempt to engage with the past justification enough for what could be seen as elder abuse.

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<sup>29</sup> *80064*. International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam. Accessed February 13, 2018. <<https://www.idfa.nl/en/film/e42b89be-9d61-4934-b12b-19cf72988d95/80064>>

Żmijewski is again playing at working through trauma but offers nothing concrete by way of a commitment to it, and this unwillingness to take authorship over the reception of either work is the most transgressive feature of Żmijewski's practice. The ambiguity of the artist's intent introduces and produces a moral problem, the work is transgressive precisely because it remains so unforthcoming about the issues that the work itself will provoke. Both *Game of Tag* and *80064* neither celebrate nor condemn, like other quintessentially transgressive artworks, they merely present and transfer the responsibility of deciding the meaning of the work (and how it is to be judged) onto the viewer. In this regard, Żmijewski's antagonistic approach is a transgressively mute one. It makes no statements and it solves no problems; it simply presents a difficult reality and leaves it there as a confrontation to the viewer. The works stand at a distance from the response they elicit. This restraint is an important feature of transgressive art; this structure of undecidability is an indication of the noncommittal attitude of transgressive artists. The works suggest no possibility that the artist is implicated in what he criticizes.

Both projects have for years been accused of taking the Holocaust lightly, having been shown at museums in Germany, Poland, and Estonia, where they were consistently met with protest. In 2012, *Game of Tag* was censored from the Martin-Gropius-Bau *Side by Side: Poland–Germany. 1000 Years of Art and History* exhibition in Berlin. The director, Gereon Sievernich, said Żmijewski was guilty of “not respecting the dignity of the victims of the Holocaust.”<sup>30</sup> Most recently, *Game of Tag* was screened at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków as part of a temporary exhibition on the

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<sup>30</sup> Marek Bartelik and Liam Kelly, “Censorship of ‘Berek’ by Artur Żmijewski, at the Martin-Gropius-Bau,” *International Association of Art Critics*, January 2012.

Holocaust, called *Poland – Israel – Germany: The Experience of Auschwitz* where it was again met with protest and censorship. Jonathan Ornstein, the executive director of the Jewish Community center in Krakow said that survivor groups contacted him to request the removal of the work from view: “They feel that it shows a lack of respect for the victims, that it is not necessary and that it takes the Holocaust lightly.”<sup>31</sup> Maria Anna Potocka, who directs the Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow, said in response to the calls for censorship that the museum “only wants to awaken the young generation’s empathy with the tragedy of the Holocaust by stirring their imagination.”<sup>32</sup> In response to complaints from the World Jewish Congress and Israel’s Holocaust Museum, the work was placed behind an enclosure with a warning to its controversial content.

The censorship of Żmijewski’s work raises important questions around art’s capacity to represent difficulty. What sort of justifications can be made for the role of offense and antagonism in Żmijewski’s practice? Does the transgression of his work enable audiences to access repressed neuroses and become psychologically enriched by the process? In *Artshock* Jake Chapman argues that post-holocaust society, altered irrevocably by the obscenities witnessed during two world wars, now suffers from a kind of global traumatic neurosis. Referring to the Freudian theory of repression, Chapman proposes that contemporary art emerged in the aftermath of the second world war as a kind of public abreactive therapy, where confrontation with trauma is assumed to result in a kind of beneficial catharsis for the neurotic. Chapman claims that, as shock is used

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<sup>31</sup> Vida Weisblum, “Żmijewski’s Video of a Game of Tag in a Nazi Gas Chamber Sparks Protests in Poland, Abroad” *ArtNews*, July 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Zalman, “GAS CHAMBER ‘GAME OF TAG’ VIDEO INSTALLATION CONTINUES TO RILE AT KRAKOW MUSEUM” *Tablet Magazine*, July 2015.

for positive ends in psychoanalytic therapy, so contemporary art tries to shock society out of its paralyzing hysteria by cruelly confronting it with de-sublimated<sup>33</sup> transgressive imagery. As “80064” suggests, to face a problem means to return to the source of the pain and relive the state in which you received your formative injury. I find Chapman’s position that transgressive art results in beneficial catharsis difficult to either contest or defend, so I defer to giving it the benefit of the doubt. “80064” clearly conveys this confrontation with cruelty described by Chapman, but as a viewer I’m left with feelings of resounding discomfort, recoiling from the transgressions I saw unfolding before me, not relief.

“In Choosing Not to Look” Susan Crane considers the implications of access to Holocaust imagery, making the argument that images of Holocaust atrocity have created a sense of familiarity with the Holocaust and that may prevent, rather than facilitate, engagement with the historical subject.<sup>34</sup> Crane argues for the censorship of Holocaust imagery, writing that “when it comes to atrocity images, the violence perpetrated on the victim is redoubled through the faithfulness of the camera to the horrors it is used to witness.”<sup>35</sup> Posing the question: how do we responsibly face, as complicit viewers, the possibility that viewing atrocity imagery revives the perpetrator’s

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<sup>33</sup> In psychoanalysis, sublimation is referred to as a type of defense mechanism, in which socially unacceptable impulses are unconsciously transformed into socially acceptable behaviors. However, Chapman’s use of “shock” in this way is incorrect. Chapman’s understanding of psychoanalysis is not harmonious with Freud, but rather, his ideas are reflective of a certain incorrect popularization of Freud’s theory and practice. Salman Akhtar, ed. *Comprehensive dictionary of psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac Books, 2009. 277.

<sup>34</sup> Susan A. Crane, "Choosing Not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography," *History and Theory* 47, no. 3 (October 2008) Wiley for Wesleyan University, 309-330.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 311.

gaze, re-enacting dehumanization and terrorizing of the victim? Crane is questioning the premise that pain immortalized through imagery communicates universally. If viewers can look at images with detached historical interest, then, Crane suggests, perhaps we should not be looking. Although Crane is thinking about photographs made in direct complicity with the violence they index, her insight into the problem of looking with “detached historical interest”<sup>36</sup> is applicable to Żmijewski’s antagonistic approach, because the one thing viewers are not when encountering *Game of Tag* or *80064* is indifferent to the historical subject. Both works facilitate an emotionally charged engagement with the past, through the offense and the recoil at the insensitivity it provokes.

Crane proposes choosing not to look rather than to look with disinterest. This is premised around the question of: are we better off in any moral or ethical sense for our exposure to Holocaust atrocity imagery? For Crane, the answer lies entirely in determining the nature of the gaze of the viewer. The “Nazi gaze,” as Crane describes it, produced imagery intended to be shared among non-sympathetic viewers: the imagined audience/gaze excluded the victims themselves or their relatives, or anyone who would be sympathetic with their suffering. “The photographers would have assumed that the gaze upon the victims would never be returned, that the reciprocity implied in being looked upon and looking back was impossible in this specific historical moment. These are the hallmarks of Nazi criminality, the dehumanization of the victims rendering them incapable of returning the gaze of their persecutors.”<sup>37</sup> The gaze, in

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 313.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 318.

other words, is shaped interactively within the social, cultural, and historical context of sharing images, and the meanings associated with difficult imagery form within collective memories. If the gaze of the viewer is historically constructed then the atrocity image's power resides in dialogical, interactive viewing.

Crane concludes that the meanings of the past are our responsibility, and that they are perpetually renegotiated with each engagement. With each reading of a text, new memories and meanings are always being generated, and old ones are exchanged. If Crane's criteria for choosing to look consists of engaged, as opposed to disinterested historical looking; a gaze that facilitates humanization of the victims; a sympathizing with their suffering; and a renegotiation of history from the perspective of the present; then Żmijewski's antagonistic approach, which consistently incites feelings of self-implication, indignation, anger, and refusal from its viewers, seems to exemplify this renewal of the past advocated by Crane.

Building upon Crane's thinking, Theodor Adorno is also helpful in thinking about how, if at all, the Holocaust should be represented artistically. In "Cultural Criticism and Society" Adorno stated that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."<sup>38</sup> Adorno criticizes work that attempts to respond to the Holocaust too directly by transforming historical suffering into an 'image' and turning victims into a work of art. Adorno is against aesthetic representation that contains "however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed out of it."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*, trans Samuel and Shierry Weber, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1981, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 86.

The ethical claim being made by Adorno is that any aesthetic representation of atrocity will carry within it this potential for aesthetic pleasure, and that the mere possibility of such a redeeming transfiguration does an injustice to the victims, for it makes the unthinkable appear to make sense. Instead, Adorno re-conceptualizes the possibility for art to represent violence negatively, in a way that intently prevents the extraction of any aesthetic pleasure or meaning. Adorno's ethic of representation is an art that empties out all possibility of pleasure and, which at the same time, limits itself to negative and indirect evocations of violence.<sup>40</sup>

Where Żmijewski's use of antagonism to address the topic of the Holocaust falls within the prescribed confines of Adorno's ethics of representation is difficult to pinpoint. Żmijewski's practice revolves around the instigation and recording of difficult situations. In themselves, these records make no pretense to artistic form. Instead they direct attention to the events they record and the bodily experiences evoked by those events. In this sense, the bodies filmed are the primary medium through which Żmijewski meditates on agency, history, and trauma. Rather than turning historical suffering into an image with a linear narrative, Żmijewski creates discomfort for the viewer by subverting viewer expectations contextually. The historical contextual framework surrounding *Game of Tag* and *80064* are absolutely essential to activating the works, as are viewer expectations for how the Holocaust should be repatriated and memorialized. The potential of Żmijewski's approach to be harmonious with Adorno's thinking lies precisely in his provocation and readiness to incorporate cruelty and conflict into his work, and to expose already existing assumptions by challenging them and stirring up controversy.

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<sup>40</sup> Gene Ray, "Mirroring Evil: Auschwitz, Art and the 'War on Terror'" *Third Text*, Vol. 17, Issue 2, 2003, 113–125.

When Adorno refers to negation, the negating work that he speaks of refuses to "work through" trauma, and it's unclear whether or not Żmijewski claims to. Ultimately, Żmijewski's practice is validated or invalidated by Adorno's ethics of representation depending on how direct or indirect the viewer finds his references to the Holocaust. References to the Holocaust, however indirect, that attempt to aestheticize and articulate an experience of trauma that is inarticulable, are precisely the type of thing that Adorno can't abide, as Adorno champions dissonance. However, I do maintain that Żmijewski practice is validated by Adorno's ethics of representation because of its ability to 'empty out all possibility of pleasure' from its viewers, leaving tension in place of enjoyment, while simultaneously limiting his works to indirect evocations of and references to violence.

Żmijewski's antagonistic strategy continues to enjoy visibility in contemporary art spaces, but given the controversy they incite, how can his works be productively incorporated into a socially transformative conversation? Thinking about antagonism as a methodology more broadly and structurally, in "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces" Chantal Mouffe advocates for the positive aspects of antagonism and conflict, advocating for conflict as essential to the articulation of boundaries in politics. Mouffe argues that a fully functioning democratic society is not one in which all conflicts have dissipated, but one in which boundaries are constantly being renegotiated and brought into debate, one in which relations of conflict are sustained mutually and with respect for radical difference, not erased.

Conflict is framed by Mouffe as "articulatory practices through which a certain order is established. Every hegemonic order is susceptible to being challenged by



counter-hegemonic practices that will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install another form of hegemony.”<sup>41</sup> This process is what Mouffe calls the agonistic struggle, and it is a struggle between opposing positions which can never be fully reconciled rationally. For Mouffe, conflict is an ever present possibility of the ethical and the political and this requires coming to terms with the instability and imperfection which pervades every order. It requires recognizing that every order, its ethics and social contracts, are products of a series of social practices endlessly transgressing their own boundaries in order to renegotiate them.

This abstract conception of the agonistic struggle can be brought back to the contemporary arts and paralleled to the practice of transgression: according to Mouffe and the agonistic approach, “critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, the arts are where the ‘agonistic struggle’ takes place, where what is legible and possible is constantly up for interpretation and renegotiation. Critical art is at liberty to offend if, through its transgressions, it makes visible and is able to articulate the under-articulated. Mouffe’s conception of conflict as an endless negotiation among radically antithetical interests and ethics manages to vindicate the most transgressive artistic practices. To grasp the political dimension and possibilities of transgression requires a willingness to prioritize

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<sup>41</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces” *Art & Research*, Volume 1, Number 2, Summer 2007, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 5.

the role transgression plays in the hegemonic struggle, over its immediate offenses and transgressions.

Žmijewski's *Game of Tag* also poses challenges to its categorization between offense and transgression. The aesthetic work itself is much more overly offensive and antagonistic than *Open Casket* but again, there is just enough ambiguity in the content that the onus is really put on the viewer to decide whether or not it victimizes its subjects, or if it trivializes the suffering of the Holocaust. The work pressurizes the viewer to make sense of the offense they feel, to disentangle and resolve their feelings, which seems to engage the audience in agonistic conflict.

If Adorno's criteria for ethical representation of the Holocaust is that no pleasure be derived from the work upon its viewing and that the topic of genocide not be aestheticized pleasurably, then Žmijewski's aggressive approach is seemingly harmonious with Adorno's ethics of representation. Crane, similar to Adorno, argues that exposure to historic Holocaust imagery desensitizes us to the atrocity it indexes. Our engagement with historic atrocity imagery cannot be through a disinterested gaze. A more meaningful engagement with the past for Crane would be to do so from the perspective of the contemporary, by engaging with the past through the present. If Crane's criteria for a meaningful engagement with Holocaust history involves an engaged (as opposed to a disinterested) gaze, and empathy with the subjects, then Žmijewski's work seemingly accomplishes this. Žmijewski's audiences are anything but disinterested when viewing his works, and Žmijewski's meditation upon the traumatic past is indirectly invoked using the contemporary moment.

*Game of Tag* is transgressive as opposed to offensive in so far as we agree that the work passes the criteria set out by Adorno and Crane. The onus is put on the viewer to decide if the work is offensive or transgressive. Either the work evokes anti-semitism from audiences, in which case it would be an offensive work, or the work evokes outrage at anti-semitic sentiment, in which case it would be transgressive.

### EPISODE III

“So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence.”  
— Susan Sontag<sup>43</sup>

Exemplifying Mouffe’s agonistic struggle is Dutch artist Renzo Martens in the cinematographic work *Episode III* (2008) (alternatively titled *Enjoy Poverty*). The film follows Martens’ activities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo over the course of two years and the project has been met with a decade of scrutiny<sup>44</sup> and a petition to have Martens United Nations press credentials revoked.<sup>45</sup> Art critics have criticized the film for perpetuating the very thing it was protesting against, such as the vicarious pleasures of watching other people in dangerous situations and a reductive stereotyping of the Congolese.<sup>46</sup>

Itself a documentary, *Episode III* satirizes documentation of poverty in Africa. It challenges viewer assumptions as it refuses to sentimentalize poverty, and exposes the ways in which consumers of poverty images enjoy such images as commodities. By enacting the very regimes of exploitation that it criticizes, *Episode III* intentionally aims

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<sup>43</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003) 102.

<sup>44</sup> Critical publications on *Episode III* include Matthias de Groof, “Reexieve ethiek in Renzo Martens’ ‘Episode III’ (Enjoy Poverty)”, *Ethische Perspectieven*, 2015, 243-251; Caitlin Frances Bruce, “Episode III: Enjoy Poverty, An Aesthetic Virus of Political Discomfort,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 9, 2016, 284-302; and Nicola Perugini & Francesco Zucconi, “Enjoy Poverty: Humanitarianism and the Testimonial Function of Images”, *Visual Studies* 32, 2017, 24-32.

<sup>45</sup> A direct reference to this is made in the film. *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* dir. Renzo Martens, 2008, <http://www.enjoypoverty.com>.

<sup>46</sup> *Episode III* is critiqued by Dan Fox in “Renzo Martens” *frieze magazine*, Issue 122, April, 2009; Paul O’Kane in “Renzo Martens, Episode III”, *Third Text* 23, 2009, 815; and Eunsong Kim in “Art & Colonialism: Renzo Martens Part 1” *contemporary*, 2016.

to make viewers uncomfortable in an effort to render more visible the power structures of humanitarian journalism and the images it sells as commodities. The film establishes at its outset that images of poverty are the Congo's most lucrative export, generating more revenue than gold, diamonds, or cocoa combined. Viewers of the film follow Martens to various locations: refugee camps, coffee and cocoa plantations, gold and oil prospecting ventures, an art gallery, and a World Bank meeting, each illuminating different facets of structural poverty in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Martens performs a variety of personas over the course of the film, moving from colonizer to ethnographer to entrepreneur, in an attempt to further clarify the operations of global capital in its varied roles.

In the first half of the film, crossing an area visibly marked by conflict, with numerous corpses visible on the ground, a discussion ensues between Martens and other reporters, and Martens is seen asking them about their work. The only stories considered of any interest are ones with negative elements, explains a freelance photographer, "Usually it has to be a disaster or a humanitarian crisis. Dead people." "But it's not me," the reporter clarifies, "It's supply and demand. It's a market out there." Martens is then seen asking another journalist about the ownership of humanitarian photographs. "I own them." "And the people in the pictures? The people you have photographed... are they owners of the pictures too?" asks Martens, "Those you photographed own nothing?" "No, because I took the pictures," replies the freelance photographer.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* dir. Renzo Martens, 2008, <http://www.enjoypoverty.com>.

Martens consistently frames his shots of the reporters from behind so as not to adopt their point of view. By doing so, Martens creates an antagonistic tension between the viewer and the journalists through the framing of the camera, turning his lens onto the reporters as the subjects of his gaze and scrutiny. As Martens' interviewees admit, witnesses to crisis and the images they produce are unabashedly influenced by the formal canons that regulate the market for images of suffering. The film makes an important connection between, on the one hand, images of suffering and poverty, and on the other, the financial mechanisms and humanitarian organizations that reproduce that poverty. These relations implicate Western viewers who, as citizens of privileged nations, benefit from this international arrangement.

In the second half of the film, Martens continues his analysis of the Congolese economy of suffering by shifting his focus from the Western reporters and their labor, to the Congolese represented in their photographs. Here, he attempt to address how those objectified by humanitarian photojournalism might begin to articulate their own gaze. Martens sets up an "emancipation program"<sup>48</sup> that aims to teach the poor how to benefit from their poverty. Martens is filmed persuading Congolese photographers to move away from photographing community celebrations, such as weddings and parties, to instead begin taking images of the suffering in their communities. "Who owns poverty?" Martens asks the local Congolese photographers. Or in other words, why continue to take pictures at family gatherings, if the documentation of abject suffering, of which the Congolese people are the more rightful owners, could earn the photographers ten times

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

as much?<sup>49</sup> After the impact of these questions, the next sequence in the film shows the Congolese photographers attempt at documenting members of their community at their most vulnerable. Martens can be seen advising the Congolese photographers on how they should shoot the jutting ribs of a malnourished child to make the picture formally attractive to Western media. Martens is seen intervening, suggesting the compositions most likely to tug at the heartstrings of Westerners viewers.

Viewers are forced to witness how the local Congolese photographers are provoked by Martens to produce the images of poverty that we Western viewers see every day in newspapers, on television, and in our individualized social media newsfeeds. We see at what disturbing cost these images are made. Further, the antagonistic approach to the filmmaking of *Episode III* reveals at what cost this film is made, and watching it offers no redemption. In Martens own words: “*Episode III* doesn’t critique by showing something that is bad, it critiques by duplicating what may be bad ... So, the critique in the film is the film as a whole ... In this film, it is not the subject that is tragic, like poverty in Africa, it is the very way that the film deals with the subject that is tragic.”<sup>50</sup> The transgression of Martens’ film lies in its exploitation of its subjects, one that mirrors the exploitative relations of power between the Congo and the West. *Episode III* is intended to demoralize, to incite discomfort, anger, and refusal in the viewer. Painful watching is linked to a kind of witnessing.

Martens characterizes this discomfort as a demystification. He is skeptical of the potential of showing the suffering and pain of others in images because it “creates a

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<sup>49</sup> *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* dir. Renzo Martens, 2008, <http://www.enjoypoverty.com>.

<sup>50</sup> T.J. Demos, “Toward a New Institutional Critique: A Conversation with Renzo Martens” *Ethics*, Documents of Contemporary Art, The MIT Press, 2015, 171.

fantasy link between the faraway sufferers and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue.”<sup>51</sup> For Martens, sympathy masks the viewers’ agency in the role of causing suffering, putting off a reflection on how “our privileges are located on the same maps as their suffering.”<sup>52</sup> By inciting discomfort, anger, and frustration *Episode III* disrupts the economies of sympathy that Martens argues sustain Western complacency.

Without taking an explicit position against the exploitation that the film reproduces, the film unfolds as itself a point of critique. Devoid of empathy, *Episode III* repeatedly denies its subjects either respect or agency in its representation of them. The film copies, in itself, the modes of exploitation that are also the film’s subject matter, and unfolds them for all to see and feel. Martens’ provocative framing of the film makes an ethical claim on the viewer; the work demands that it be judged based on whether or not it was a document made in good faith. *Episode III* uniquely pressurizes viewers into adopting a position: we have to decide whether the work empathizes with or victimizes those it involves, those on the receiving end of the crime, those who most acutely feel its after-effects. Is it a work of solidarity and sympathy, or is it a work of exposure and exploitation? Martens parades misery himself in order to observe how misery is daily paraded before the world’s cameras, and to what end? For whom does the film incite discomfort?

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<sup>51</sup> C. F. Bruce, “Episode III: Enjoy Poverty” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 9 (2016) International Communication Association, 296.

<sup>52</sup> T.J. Demos, “Toward a New Institutional Critique: A Conversation with Renzo Martens” *Ethics, Documents of Contemporary Art*, The MIT Press, 2015, 172.



In an interview Martens explains that what he “tried to make is a document that doesn’t explain what exploitation means, but makes one feel what it is.”<sup>53</sup> Martens is working out of the concern that to employ sympathy as a tool to make images of devastation distracts from self-implication. When images of exploitation are met with a sympathetic gaze the problem is automatically located somewhere else. That is to say that the friendly witness and, by extension, audiences who share the gaze of that witness, identify with the suffering displayed, rather than understanding how they themselves may contribute to that suffering. Martens claims that “Empathy produces a total travesty if it doesn’t unravel the nature of the outsider’s presence. What the world calls for is something else, a deeper empathy I’d say.”<sup>54</sup> *Episode III*, by avoiding standard cinematic conventions that induce a sympathetic response in the viewer, is able to spur an offended but more emotive, more meaningful sense of empathy with the subjects of his camera lens. We often expect the artist to offer insight into the economic and visual contradictions we live under, or at least to offer beautiful exceptions to that world, but *Episode III* does not offer either of these solutions. Instead, the film presents a difficult situation and leaves it there as a confrontation with the viewer.

A recurring frame in the film shows Martens and some assistants carrying metal cases while walking through the jungle. Martens takes the lids off the cases being carried throughout the film and forms a neon installation reading “ENJOY POVERTY.” He connects it to a generator and lights up a night-time festival. A brief scene, but a telling moment, shows Martens explaining that the sign is in English, not the native

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<sup>53</sup> Yulia Tikhonova, “Renzo Martens: Enjoy Poverty,” *Flash Art Magazine*, Issue 278, May – June, 2011.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Congolese French because “for the audience, it needs to be in English.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, the Congolese are not the ones for whom poverty is to enjoy. In no uncertain terms, Martens conveys his artistic intent that if you can understand Martens’ indictment to *Enjoy Poverty*, he’s addressing you as an English speaking, Western viewer. *Episode III* demands that its Western audience project themselves into the scenes they are viewing through self-implication, to understand the power dynamics at play in the construction of the work. By intentionally disturbing and alienating his audiences, Martens makes viewers ask: what is our relationship to the images we see and how do we habitually look at them?

Martens’ *Episode III* seems to me the clearest example of how agonistic conflict functions in terms of challenging hegemony through transgression. Not only does the work succeed in doing so, but it is also the explicit aim of the artist to challenge a hegemonic order. For Martens “depicting immorality, racism, exploitation, as if they were phenomena outside of our lives, as if they existed only on the other side of our lenses, relieves us, but it also relieves such a depiction of any claim on reality.”<sup>56</sup> Meaning, that if art limits itself to the morally acceptable, it conveniently obscures the problematic production processes that sustain our contemporary art world. Although he repeats an unethical image practice, he does so precisely because antagonism disrupts the hegemony that perpetuates that same unethical image practice. What sets the work apart as exceptionally transgressive is that its artistic vision is not only intent on elucidating the hegemonic order, but also to deliberately disturbing it. *Episode III* is

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<sup>55</sup> *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* dir. Renzo Martens, 2008, <http://www.enjoypoverty.com>.

<sup>56</sup> T.J. Demos, “Toward a New Institutional Critique: A Conversation with Renzo Martens” *Ethics, Documents of Contemporary Art*, The MIT Press, 2015, 171-177.

the most direct evocation of agonistic conflict and the most transgressive of the three works. If the aim of agonistic conflict is to shed light on the shortcomings of the democracy we already possess, and to renegotiate our democracy to produce a more equitable order, *Episode III* contributes to this process. The film not only sheds light on the structure of our own hegemonic order and what this hegemony relies upon (cheap labour, exploitation, pervading neocolonialism) by representing it, it also makes further ethical demands of its viewers by making them complicit in this inequity.

## CONCLUSION

Although Lamarque, Simon, Adorno, Crane, and Mouffe are employed to defend transgressive practices from a variety of perspectives in this thesis, what they all hold in agreement is that art teaches, and art's shocks and disturbances are often justified by this overriding purpose. Art 'teaches' not by communicating specific lessons but by enlarging our sense of what is possible. Transgressive art as social research usually does not take the form of structured studies with controlled experiments, but it can still provide us with an understanding of ourselves. This understanding is particularly attuned to facets of our ethical subjectivity that are not easily articulated or measured. In the words of Jean-François Lyotard, transgressive art "makes the world an alien place to us, and then returns us to it."<sup>57</sup> Viewers can either stand in agreement, or in opposition to the messages conveyed by transgressive work, but rarely do they stand in a position of indifference. In this measure, transgressive art practices have the capacity to remake our world.

In summation, although both employ tactics of antagonism, shock, and offense, we can delineate between transgression and mere offense according to the work's efficacy in challenging hegemony. Works are transgressive when they put into question the hegemonic order and works are offensive when they reinforce the hegemonic order. The value of these challenges to hegemony lies in the constant need to renegotiate democracy, in the need to actively participate in our democratic communities. By being open to the opinions of others and by being willing to explain our positions to other

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<sup>57</sup> Anthony Julius, *Transgressions, The Offenses of Art*, The University of Chicago Press, 2003, 33.

members of our democratic community, we are more critical and reflexive in our ethical commitments.

This process of re-negotiation within and through agonistic conflict can find its arena in the arts, because the imaginative distance that the arts facilitate allow an encounter with an art work to be just far enough removed that even the most radical challenges to our sense of order are disturbing, yet tolerable. The arts offer a unique space for the renegotiation of ethics, because by virtue of our imagination, by engaging with representations of violence rather than lived violence, we can engage with topics otherwise unapproachable. Transgressive practices are uniquely suited to evoking a self-assessment of our ethics. By facilitating the experience of offense, the arts allow viewers the opportunity to realize what they stand for when being met by radical difference: the transgressive art work.

*Open Casket* presents a unique challenge to the categorization of offense and transgression. It is offensive because of its commodity racism, but the work is also ambiguous enough in its formal presentation that it was able to facilitate the same kind of agonistic conflict that Mouffe advocates, but only as an unintended consequence. It is undeniable that the controversy surrounding the exhibition of *Open Casket* facilitated a robust conversation around and criticism of white supremacy in the art institution. Because of its critical reception by audiences, I found this difficult to categorize as either merely offensive or transgressive.

I outlined the offensive nature of the work using Hannah Black's claim that the painting is an instance of commodity racism, and I compared the function of the painting to the similar function of lynching photography, to establish the work's offense

in unambiguous terms. Lemarque's concept of aesthetic transvaluation was invoked in relation to *Open Casket* as a rationalization against destruction of the work; I argued that although our initial reaction to the painting is one of anger and indignation, we can come to appreciate the same work for its pedagogical value, but only in hindsight —hindsight we don't yet have. I turned to Simon's propositions regarding how difficult work should be exhibited, and paired his perspective with Lemarque's, which led me to conclude that *Open Casket* has the potential to be reframed as transgressive as opposed to merely offensive depending on how the work is presented curatorially. Ultimately, I concluded that if we consider the work through the lens of agonistic conflict, *Open Casket* must be understood to use the tactics of transgression, but it in the case of its exhibition at the *2017 Whitney Biennial*, *Open Casket* ends up reinforcing hegemonic racism.

Żmijewski's *Game of Tag* also poses challenges to its categorization. The aesthetic work itself is much more overtly offensive and antagonistic than is *Open Casket* but again, there is just enough ambiguity in the content that the onus is really put on the viewer to decide whether or not it victimizes its subjects, or if it trivializes the suffering of the Holocaust. The work pressures the viewer to make sense of the offense they feel, to disentangle and resolve their feelings, which seems to engage the audience in agonistic conflict.

In the Żmijewski case study I looked to Adorno to consider the work in light of his views about representations of the Holocaust. I determined that if Adorno's criteria for ethical representation of the Holocaust is that no pleasure can be derived from the work upon its viewing, and that the topic of genocide not be aestheticized pleasurably,

then Żmijewski's aggressive approach is seemingly harmonious with Adorno's position. Crane, in a move similar to Adorno's, argues that exposure to historic Holocaust imagery desensitizes us to the atrocity it indexes. Our engagement with historic atrocity imagery cannot be through a disinterested gaze. A more meaningful engagement with the past for Crane would be to explicitly look back from the perspective of the contemporary, by engaging with the past through the present. Żmijewski's audiences are anything but disinterested when viewing his works, and Żmijewski's meditation upon the traumatic past is indirectly evoked using the contemporary moment. I concluded that if Crane's criteria for a meaningful engagement with Holocaust history involves an engaged (as opposed to a disinterested) gaze, and empathy with the subjects, then Żmijewski's work seemingly accomplishes this.

I found *Game of Tag* to be transgressive as opposed to offensive in so far as we agree that the work passes the criteria set out by Adorno and Crane. The onus is put on the viewer to decide if the work is offensive or transgressive; either the work evokes anti-semitism from audiences, in which case it would be an offensive work, or the work evokes outrage at anti-semitic sentiment, in which case it would be transgressive.

Martens' *Episode III* seems to me the clearest example of how agonistic conflict functions in terms of challenging hegemony through transgression. Not only does it succeed in doing so but this is also the explicit aim of the artist: to challenge a hegemonic order. I found *Episode III* to be the most direct evocation of agonistic conflict and the most transgressive of the three works. *Episode III* not only sheds lights on the structure of our own hegemonic order and what this hegemony relies upon by

representing it, but it also makes further ethical demands of its viewers by making them complicit in the inequity it presents.

Outside the scope of this criticism project, but absolutely essential to mention, is that while I agree with Mouffe that agonistic conflict is integral to our ongoing development of a more radical democracy, I am concerned that the person who gets the privilege of renegotiating their ethics through an encounter with the transgressive, is not the same person who had to pay the price of that lesson. From the perspective of the curatorial profession, it is difficult, if not impossible, to put a price on commissioning transgressive works because even if it could be guaranteed that the work would be successfully transgressive and not just merely offensive, the question remains: just how much of another's emotional turmoil is a conversation worth? As curatorial professionals, how do we begin to take accountability for the reception of a work, when the stakes of a work being received as merely offensive, as opposed to transgressive, are so high? Although transgressive works may succeeded in challenging hegemony, as a curator, the exhibition of offensive work seems an incalculable experiment.



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